

King Canute's Message to Gorbachev

By Roderick MacFarquhar

King Canute has always had a bad press. He never believed he could stem the tide; it was his courtiers who did. Mikhail Gorbachev gets a good press, yet he seems to believe he can hold back the waves of independence engulfing the shores of the Soviet domestic empire. Mr. Gorbachev should learn from the British and French experiences.

The first lesson is that it is the subject peoples, not the metropolitan power, who will decide what is a colony and what is an integral part of the motherland. The British learned that in Ireland, the French in Algeria. Mr. Gorbachev will have to learn that in the Baltic states, in Georgia and doubtless elsewhere, too.

Having opened the floodgates of freedom in Eastern Europe, he does not have the power to order the tide to stop at the frontiers of the Soviet Union. There is no magic left in the tired "salt water theory of imperialism" — that nations are guilty of colonialism only when they cross oceans, not when they seek manifest destiny across land boundaries and end up ruling alien peoples.

The second lesson Mr. Gorbachev must learn is that decolonization in-

volves at least two parties, and so its pace cannot be unilaterally determined. He wants a measured, constitutional procedure for secession, taking at least five years. But as events in East Europe last fall demonstrated, once colonized peoples sense that the imperial will to rule has gone, the dominoes fall rapidly.

Mr. Gorbachev may be able to bully little Lithuania into line. But how will he restrain 40 million Ukrainians if and when they get their independence act together and prove equally impatient? Would the Russian people tolerate the bloodshed that accompanied the British withdrawals from Kenya, Cyprus and Aden, or the French withdrawals from Vietnam and Algeria?

If Mr. Gorbachev's answer is "no," then his next lesson is about the mode of decolonization. Here the British model is almost certainly inappropriate. Seeking to implant their institutions before leaving, the British have spread decolonization over several decades, with Hong Kong being handed back to China 50 years after the jewel in the crown, the Indian Subcontinent. Soviet institutions have been transplanted for 70 years, and if they have not taken root yet they never will do so.

So Mr. Gorbachev should consider the French model: if you can't beat them, pre-empt them. As soon as he returned to power in 1958, President Charles de Gaulle offered France's African colonies autonomy within a new French Community. Only Guinea

chose total independence outside the community, but as a result, by 1960 Mr. Gaulle had conceded independence to all the other ex-colonies in order to maintain close political and economic ties with them.

Mr. Gorbachev would do well to graft a British formula onto the French model by offering to turn the Soviet Union into a Russian commonwealth. This would mean offering the republics immediate independence,

You can't
hold back
the tide,
so go with
the flow.

but only by accepting membership of the commonwealth could they retain advantageous ties with the Russian Republic. This would involve acknowledging the Russian Republic's head of state as concurrently head of the commonwealth.

It was such a formula that kept India in the British Commonwealth as a fully independent republic, which in turn greatly helped to make the organization palatable to later ex-colo-

nies in Asia and Africa. This insured that the Commonwealth today contains 48 sovereign states. Some Soviet republics, like Byelorussia, might feel close enough to Russia to want to retain the Russian president as their own, much as Australia retains the Queen as its head of state.

The advantages of a swift cut of the Gordian knot would be that Mr. Gorbachev would regain the initiative; face would be saved on all sides, a threat to U.S.-Soviet détente would be removed and Russia would preserve much of the substance of the union without the obligation to insist on metropolitan rights by brute force as in Georgia a year ago.

Perhaps most importantly, by avoiding bitter and bloody long-drawn-out struggles, he would short-circuit the anger of Russian expatriates, which he is now unwisely stoking up. Another French lesson he must remember is that the Fourth Republic was brought down by Algerian colonists in alliance with the military.

Of course, Mr. Gorbachev could lose a few. Some republics, as in the cases of British Burma and French Guinea, might prefer total separation. But the way he is going now, he will lose them all.

A final piece of advice: if a republic opts out, Mr. Gorbachev should treat it with benign neglect, as the British treated Burma, not vindictively, as the French handled Guinea. Mr. Gorbachev should leave the Lithuanians their light bulbs. □

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